

# Some Typical Non-Rāmāyaṇic Episodes in Ramakien—Their Indian Connections and Some Rāmāyaṇa Characters in Ramakien in Thai Mould



Satya Vrat Shastri





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## Preface

In my study of the Thai *Ramakien*, the Thai *Rāmāyaṇa*, a question that has been frequently put to me is how different is the Thai *Rāma* story from that of *Vālmīki*'s or for that matter any other Indian version of it. My answer to that has always been: As far as the kernel\* of it goes, it is the same, the difference, and a considerable one, lies in the large number of episodes and sub-episodes that form the warp and woof of the Thai version. These episodes and sub-episodes are taken to be the innovation of the Thais. That is the general view of the *Rāmāyaṇa* scholars, based as it is on the non-availability of such episodes and sub-episodes, in any of the Indian versions.

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\* The kernel figures in a stanza known in Sanskrit circles as *ekaśloki Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Rāmāyaṇa* in one stanza which reads as follows :

*ādau rāmatapovanādigamanam hatvā mṛgaṁ kāncanām  
Vaiidehiharaṇam jāṭayumaraṇam sugrīvasambhaṣaṇam/  
Vālīnīrdalam samudratarāṇam laṅkapurīdāhanam  
pāścād rāvaṇakumbhakarṇahananam etad dhi rāmāyaṇam//*

Starting with the visit of *Rāma* to penance groves etc., the killing of golden deer followed by abduction of *Sītā*, the death of *Jāṭāyu*, the pact with *Sugrīva*, the annihilation of *Vālī*, the crossing of the ocean, the burning of the city of *Laṅkā* and last of all the killing of *Rāvaṇa* and *Kumbhakarṇa*—that much is the *Rāmāyaṇa*".



I myself held this view for long till I, in the course of my researches, came upon evidence of their source in Indian literature, particularly Jain and Buddhist and in an isolated case in folklore. In the folklore the portrait of Rāvaṇa is drawn by Sītā by cow dung in the Bundelkhand region of India while in the Thai version it is drawn with chalk on a slate. It was this which when come to notice of Rāma led to his ordering the execution of Sītā. I thought the discovery of the presence of the seeds of those of the episodes and the sub-episodes as have till now been considered typically Thai in non-Hindu sources through all the painstaking efforts needs to be brought to the notice of the scholarly community of both Thailand and India. Hence the present attempt. This will lend credence to the view that the Rāma saga in countries outside India is sourced to more than one tradition which includes both literary and folk and in the literary too not necessarily to the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki.

It is to be hoped the scholars and the general public interested in the Rāma story would encourage the writer of these lines with their appreciation to carry out similar studies with regard to similar episodes and sub-episodes figuring in other foreign versions of the Rāma story.

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## Some Typical Non-Rāmāyaṇic Episodes in Ramakien—Their Indian Connections and Some Rāmāyaṇa Characters in Ramakien in Thai Mould

### Birth of Sītā

Contrary to the Vālmīkian version of Sītā's birth that attributes divine origin to her, the Ramakien, in a brazen departure, shifts her parentage to the demon couple Rāvaṇa and Mandodarī. Her macabre conduct soon after she was born in cursing her father thrice (kill him), was interpreted by the soothsayers as harbinger of disaster to the Rākṣaṣa race. In order to liquidate the malignant child, she was thrown, encased in a jar, in a river to float to her end. However, instead of any harm to her, a divine lotus cropped up in the river to steer the jar safe to the bank. King Janaka who was practicing austerities nearby, retrieved the jar and was wonder-struck to find therein a new-born girl. The king deposited the jar in a pit where a lotus had mysteriously emerged to sustain it. After the operation of his army failed to locate the jar, the king himself decided to plough the land. No sooner did he launch upon the operation than there emerged the jar with a pretty girl perched on a bed of roses in it. As she had arisen from the furrows worked out by the king, the girl was given the appropriate name of Sītā.



Representing an admixture of several strands of the various accounts of Sītā's birth, it turns out to be the most bloated version of the episode. It is doubtless a far cry from her divine origin to transfer her parentage to the demons, but the Thai version has not been able to totally shed its fascination for her divine origin. It is unmistakably evident from viewing her birth as a consequence of Mandodarī's partaking of the mystic rice-balls. The child's emergence from the pit to which Janaka had assigned the jar after sixteen long years also invests her birth with divine overtones. The lotus that crops up from nowhere in the river to steer the jar to the bank, as also the mass of lotuses which form a cosy bed for the child in the jar are but an echo of her miraculous birth from the pericarp of a golden lotus, as detailed in the *Daśāvatāracarita* of Kṣemendra.

Besides these subtle similarities with the Indian sources, there is sound evidence to believe that the version was not an invention of the Thai (or any alien) authors. No less an authoritative text than the *Mahābhāgavata-purāṇa* unequivocally refers to Sītā as the daughter of Mandodarī. The version, however, seems to have originated from the *Vasudevahiṇḍi* (5th century A.D.) which is the earliest text to describe Sītā as a daughter of Rāvaṇa and Mandodarī. As the astrologers had predicted that Mandodarī's first child would spell disaster to the Rākṣasas, Rāvaṇa resolved to forsake it, when born, and married Mandodarī for whom he had taken deep fancy. When she gave birth to the first child, a daughter, one of the ministers was asked to dispose of the child, encased in a box, which he deposited in Janaka's field. Janaka made over the child to the care of his chief queen Dhārinī.

The account bristles with the details that the Thais have drawn upon heavily to work up the aforesaid version of Sītā's birth which is taken to be as their unique creation.



## Episode of Jihva

The brief episode of Jihva symbolizes the contrast between devotion to duty and brazen recklessness.

Once Rāvaṇa left Laṅkā in the charge of Jihva, the husband of his sister Śūrpaṇakhā, and went to the forest for an important work. Jihva guarded the town so conscientiously that he did not have even a wink of sleep for seven nights. Ultimately, as if to 'revenge' her humiliation, *nidrā* (sleep) overwhelmed him. In order to protect the town while he was asleep, he stretched his tongue so wide that it surrounded it (Laṅkā) effectively. That plunged the town into darkness. On return, Rāvaṇa found all entrances to Laṅkā blocked. Incensed at Jihva's action, he cut his tongue to gain entry into the town. Jihva fell dead. Rāvaṇa was full of remorse. He performed the obsequies of his brother-in-law in accordance with the prescribed rites.

There is apparently nothing in the Rāma-literature of India, which may be said to have inspired the interesting story. It, however, seems to be a distant (but distinct) echo of what has been said of Vidyujjihva, the lord of demons in the Uttarakāṇḍa of Vālmīki's epic. To be sure, Vidyujjihva is the demon to whom was married Śūrpaṇakhā, the sister of Rāvaṇa and it was he who, termed as Jihva in the Ramakien met his end at Rāvaṇa's hand. According to the Vālmīki account Rāvaṇa, in the course of his expedition to the Pātāla, vanquished Vidyujjihva's forces and killed him at Aśmanagara.

The tiny episode of Vidyujjihva in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* captured the imagination of the non-Indian authors rather strongly. The way it has been developed in Seri Rāma at some length, closely resembles the Thai version. The Thai



episode is deeply indebted to the Malayan epic for its different contours.

### Rāma's Meeting with Hanumān

As Rāma, in the course of his search for Sītā, fell asleep under a tree, Lakṣmaṇa mounted guard to ward off any eventuality. In the meanwhile a burly monkey shook the tree violently to catch Lakṣmaṇa's attention and persisted with the exercise for quite some time. Lakṣmaṇa took it as an affront and took up his bow to punish the monkey, but to his dismay and amazement, the monkey snatched from him both the bow and the arrow and darted to the tree with surprising alacrity. Lakṣmaṇa felt small and awakened his brother to apprise him of what had transpired there. As Rāma looked upwards, he recognized the recognizances of the monkey. Hanumān was equally quick to conclude that the person who had recognized his recognizances could have been none else but Nārāyaṇa himself. He reverently approached Rāma and vowed, thenceforth, undying allegiance to him. Rāma sought his help in tracing out his wife. Hanumān conducted him to Sugrīva.

This somewhat comic account of Rāma's meeting with Hanumān seems to be a bloated version of what we know of their meeting from the folk tradition, as it is prevalent in North India. According to it, Lakṣmaṇa, while plucking fruits for his elder brother, enters into an argument with Hanumān, which slowly climaxes into a pitched fight. Hanumān was convincingly defeated. On learning that Lakṣmaṇa was Rāma's brother, Hanumān takes refuge with Rāma and conducts the two brothers to Sugrīva.

Despite their apparent divergences, the two versions concur in essence. They culminate in Hanumān's reverential



submission to Rāma and his ushering the two brothers to the monkey-chief Sugrīva. It is interesting to note that whereas in the folk tradition Hanumān tastes defeat, in the Thai version it is Lakṣmaṇa who has to eat an humble pie. This accords well with the high importance accorded to Hanumān in the Thai version. All this is a prelude to the Phalāgama, the final outcome.

### Beñjakayī : Fake Sītā

As has been recounted earlier, in a bid to frustrate Rāma in the attempt to launch an operation against him, Rāvaṇa bade the dreadful girl Beñjakayī to assume the form of Sītā's corpse and float in the river near Rāma's camp, where he usually took his bath in the morning. True to the demon's calculations, on seeing the dead body of his wife, Rāma fell into mourning. Hanumān was, however, sure that Sītā could not have committed suicide like lesser persons. As he put the corpse on the burning pyre to test its genuineness, the girl leapt into the sky in her true form. Hanumān dragged her down to Rāma, who in his magnanimity condoned her ghastly guilt. She was after all the daughter of his friend Vibhīṣaṇa.

Beñjakayī may not have her counterpart in the Indian literature on Rāma, she, in essentials, serves the same purpose as the spurious head of Sītā, known to the later writings. According to the *Bālarāmāyaṇa*, while Rāma's troops were engaged in constructing the causeway, Rāvaṇa flies close to Rāma's camp, and in a bid to avert it, throws Sītā's fake head (*māyāśirṣa*) on the sea-shore, killing the Yantra-Jānakī in full view of Rāma. However, both the stratagems failed miserably.



## Hanumān's Dispute with Nīla and his encounter with Suvarṇamatsyā

The two episodes are taken to be the uniquely Thai inventions, unknown to the Indian texts. That, however, is not the case. Hanumān's stand-off with Nīla can well be traced to some of the late Indian sources. The Rāmāyaṇas of Raṅganātha and Kṛttivāsa concur in detailing the dispute which stemmed from the clash of ego of the heady rivals. The Thai version is closer to the Kṛttivāsa account. According to it the cause of quarrel was that Nala (not Nīla) held the rocks brought by Hanumān in his left hand. Infuriated at the slight inherent in it, Hanumān brought four rocks at a time, which Nala could not grasp. Each accused the other of the foul play. Both ultimately approached Rāma to have the issue resolved.

Suvarṇamatsya's destructive operation, on the other hand, seems to have been inspired by such early works as the *Setubandha*, the *Jānakī-haraṇa* (XIC. 46) and *Bālarāmāyaṇa* (VIII. 52) that unequivocally allude to a concerted attack on the causeway by a host of determined fish.

So far as Hanumān's begetting one son each on Beṇḍakayī and Suvarṇamatsyā is concerned, it may well be reminiscent of the birth of Makaradhvaja, as we know it from the folk-tradition and texts like the *Jaimini-Bhārata*, *Ānanda-Rāmāyaṇa* and *Bhāvārtha-Rāmāyaṇa* (V. 20). The *Ānanda-Rāmāyaṇa* (1.11.88) attributes his birth to his mother the female alligator's swallowing Hanumān's phlegm.

### Episode of Maiyarāba : Abduction of Rāma

Having failed to abort the construction of the causeway that brought Rāma and his allies to the door-steps of Laṅkā,



Rāvaṇa deposes his devoted friend Maiyarāba, the king of Pātāla, to take on Rāma effectively. Maiyarāba renders everybody in Rāma's camp unconscious with a soporific powder and kidnaps him (Rāma) to Pātāla to throw him, at an opportune moment, in the boiling water. On coming to his own, Vibhīṣaṇa is quick to discover that Rāma had been carried away by Maiyarāba. He deposes Hanumān to retrieve him before any harm is done to him. Overcoming a series of frustrating hurdles including a fierce clash with his son Macchānu born on Suvarṇamatsyā, Hanumān enters into a lotus-stalk to reach Maiyarāba's sanctuary in the nether region. He is led by Maiyarāba's sister Phirkuan (Virākvaṇā) whose son, as she informed him, was to be roasted ere long in a cauldron along with Rāma, to the place where the latter was incarcerated. Hanumān knocked down Maiyarāba in a terrific battle after he had disposed of his soul positioned in the form of a black bee on the Trikūṭa mountain. He releases Rāma from the captivity and brings him back to his camp.

In view of its dramatic overtones bordering on the miraculous, the episode has evoked wide acceptance in the non-Indian Rāmāyaṇas. The fact it is not met with in Vālmīki's epic would seem to invest it with a measure of uniqueness. While credit is due to the Thai authors for the effective presentation of the episode, it has doubtless originated from the *Mairāvaṇacarita*, said to be a part of the *Jaiminibhārata*. The account of Rāma's abduction and his rescue by Hanumān as detailed in the little known text, bears striking similarities with the Thai version, the only major point of difference being that in the *Mairāvaṇacarita* Mairāvaṇa is said to have carried away both the brothers. In view of their close resemblance it is reasonable to hold



that the Thai version is but a free rendering of the account in the *Mairāvaṇacarita*.

The episode is related with some variations in the *Ānanda* and *Kṛttivāsa Rāmāyaṇas* as well.

### Rāvaṇa's Soul

The stratagems of Rāvaṇa to browbeat Rāma off the field having failed successively, Hanumān, gears up, under the advice of Vibhiṣaṇa to destroy Rāvaṇa's soul kept in a cage with his preceptor Khobut (Goputra). He manipulates to have the cage from the preceptor, creates with his miraculous power a replica of Rāvaṇa's soul and puts it in the receptacle to replace the original which Aṅgada, at his behest, buries beneath the sea-shore. With Rāvaṇa's soul thus disposed of, there is no difficulty for Rāma is killing the demon.

Much has been made of the motif of Rāvaṇa's encaged soul deposited elsewhere to ensure longevity to him. Though mainly espoused by the Thai and other non-Indian versions, the motif is not unknown in India. There is evidence to believe that it may have travelled to the Thai country from India itself. The *Birhor Rāmakathā* has it that Rāvaṇa's soul was secured in a box in his palace. It needed the joint efforts of Hanumān and Lakṣmaṇa to carry it away and release the soul.

The *Brahmacakra* has a slightly different account of the motif. There the soul is replaced by 'heart'. After Hanuman burnt down Laṅkā, it confirms, Rāvaṇa had deposited his 'heart' with a sage. Hanumān masquerading as Rāvaṇa retrieved it from the sage and made it over to Rāma.

Evidently the embryonic motif has been developed to



a considerable length in the Thai version with fascinating dramatic overtones.

The episodes analysed above are new in the sense that they do not occur in the *Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*. That, however, does not entitle them to be projected as inventions of the Thai people. They, as shown earlier, can be convincingly traced back to the Indian sources, be they the later writings or folk or oral tradition.

### Banishment of Sītā

Of the episodes that the Ramakien shares with the *Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa* but differ in details, the banishment of Sītā merits foremost attention. According to Vālmīki's epic, Rāma banished Sītā because of the public cry with regard to her chastity, the affirmation of her innocence by Fire and other deities notwithstanding. Lakṣmaṇa took her to the forest next morning and directed her to Vālmīki's hermitage on the bank of the river Tamasā.

The Ramakien, on the other hand, attributes Sītā's expulsion to the portrait of Rāvaṇa that she was duped to draw on a slab by Śūrpaṇakhā's daughter masquerading as her maid, who vanished in thin air the moment it was half completed. Rāma was now convinced of her extra-marital leanings. Equally confident of her chastity, Sītā did her best to allay the ill-founded apprehensions of her husband, but to no avail. Seething with anger, Rāma ordered Lakṣmaṇa to put her to sword in the wilderness and bring back her heart to assure him of his having carried out his orders. Lakṣmaṇa not being able to kill her due to her power of chastity, returned with the heart of a dead deer which he found on the way.

The most glaring divergence between Vālmīki and the



Ramakien versions is that while in Vālmīki it is the public slander that draws Rāma to expel Sītā, he is smitten with serious doubts about her chastity in the Ramakien. It would, however, be against sound evidence to treat it as an invention of the Thai poets. The Jaina epic *Paumacariu* is the earliest work to underscore Rāma's misgivings about the fidelity of his wife. The motif of Rāvaṇa's portrait came to be invented to give his suspicion a logical basis. The earliest mention of the motif is found in the *Upadeśapada* of Haribhadra Sūri (8th century A.D.), though it speaks of the portrait of Rāvaṇa's feet only. Thus the ground for the Thai version to project Rāvaṇa's picture as the cause of Sītā's banishment was prepared in India long before the motif travelled to Śyāmadeśa.

#### Birth of Sītā's Son (s)

The account of Lava's birth as detailed in the Ramakien and the Vālmīki's epic, is marked by total variation. According to the former while living in the hermitage of Vajmṛga during her banishment, Sītā gave birth to one son only. He was named Manikuṭa by the sage. Sītā once left the child beside the sage who was engaged in meditation at the moment. However, stung by the cold retort of the monkey-mother's that she had left the child in the care of a sage with eyes closed in meditation, she hastily retrieved it (the child) the sage not noticing it. With a view to making up her 'loss', which otherwise was sure to exacerbate her agony, the sage created another son for her by his miraculous power, though he had found by that time that Manikuṭa was safe with his mother. The sage gave the newly created child the name of Lava and made him over to Sītā, who brought up the children, one born on her and the other



miraculously created by the sage, with fond care.

It is interesting to find that the *Ānandarāmāyaṇa* has much the same version of the birth of Sītā's sons, the only notable divergence being that the son born to her was named Kuṣa. The circumstances that led the sage to create Lava in order to compensate Sītā for the supposed loss of Kuṣa led the sage to create Lava in order to compensate Sītā for the supposed loss of Kuṣa concur with the Ramakien almost to the last detail. According to the *Kathāsaritsāgara* version Sītā had given birth to Lava and it was Kuṣa who was created by Vālmīki as he suspected the other child to have been carried away by a wild animal.

The Thai version of the birth of Sītā's sons thus originated in India and travelled to Thailand at some point of time.

The *Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*, on the other hand, unequivocally states that Sītā had given birth to two sons, respectively named Kuṣa and Lava, leaving no scope for the sage to exercise his miraculous power.

### Denouement of the Story

The most glaring difference between the Ramakien and the *Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa* concerns the denouement of the story. The Thai Ramakien ends in the reconciliation of the estranged couple, brought about by Lord Ísvara (Isuan in Thai, i.e. Śiva) as a reward for Rāma's services in ridding the earth of the menace of the demons. In view of the hard postures that the couple had struck, Ísvara proceeds in the matter with diplomatic skill. He severely berates Rāma. The latter pleads guilty and tenders unqualified apology to Sītā for the wrong he had done to her for no fault of her. Sītā is fastidious but relents at the behest of the Lord but not before expressing her reservations about Rāma's



unpredictable behaviour. They lead a happy conjugal life thereafter.

This is in stark contrast to Vālmīki's epic which ends on a tragic note, with Sītā entombed in earth for ever. However, the happy end to the epic story was not unknown in India. Plays like the *Kundamālā* and the *Uttararāmacarita* end with Rāma's re-joining with Sītā. That might have prompted the author of the Thai Rāmāyaṇa to conclude the epic story on a happy note.

## Ramayana Characters in Thai Mould

The changes that the Thai have made in the Rāmāyaṇa narrative may have turned its heroes into more attractive figures, but in the process that has led to the loss of much of their original sheen that has inspired millions in India. They are essentially Thai figures though drawn from the Indian source/s. It is a measure of the transformation the epic characters have undergone in the Thai version that Hanumān emerges as the most colourful figure, and everyone else, not precluding Rāma, is overshadowed by his phenomenal might and resourcefulness that prove equal to the toughest challenge. In view of the new dimensions lent to the Rāmāyaṇa characters by the Thai milieu that an appraisal of them in their new Thai Incarnation in some depth is bound to be rewarding.

### RĀMA

To the Indian mind, Rāma is an epitome of the virtues that combine to turn him into an ideal, rather a divine figure, whom society has revered over the ages. While his Thai counterpart, evolved out of interplay of non-Indian ethos, tradition and folklore, concurs with him in a substantial



measure, some of the contours that he has strangely acquired are breathtakingly queer. More than the similarities, it is the divergences that lend him a new aura.

The divinity of Rāma is beyond question. He is doubtless Nārāyaṇa who had incarnated as the son of Dasāratha to release the world from the terror of the demons. Rāma himself was conscious of his divine origin. He took Maṇikuta's conduct as an offence to Nārāyaṇa. His divinity evoked widespread reverence.

There is nothing much to distinguish him till his return from Laṅkā. His sincerity as a friend had unfolded itself in his settling scores with Vālin on behalf of his ally and friend Sugrīva. In view of the restricted avenues to which his fight with Rāvaṇa is reduced, his achievements on the battlefield surprisingly remain subdued. But for Hanumān's stratagem in having his (Rāvaṇa's) soul buried underground, the demon might have defeated Rāma on the battlefield. It was only after Hanumān's trickery succeeded that Rāma could kill him (Rāvaṇa) in the battle. While his encounter with Maṇikuta, whom he had not yet known to be his son, underwent sublimation, he could neither browbeat the boy into submission nor humble him in the battle. If carried further, the combat could have gone either way.

It is the non-Indian component of his character that puts him on a different footing. As conceived in the Thai tradition, Rāma, his divine origin apart, is indistinguishable from a common man.

The stratagems cunningly employed by Rāvaṇa to humble Rāma off the field might not have served their purpose to the desired degree, they have certainly been instrumental in exposing him to awkward situations. It is surprising that he was duped with incredible ease into



presuming Sītā dead on seeing so much as her replica floating in the river, forgetting the deceit the demons were capable of exercising on others. It was Hanumān's alertness that saved him from what might have been a disaster. His brush with Maiyarāba shows him in still poorer light. It is a measure of the lack of alertness against the enemy's possible depredations that he was thrown into swoon by such a cheap device as magic powder and carried unnoticed, to Pātāla, to be encaged like a petty criminal. It was again Hanuman who rescued him after a long drawn struggle, at great peril to himself. If Rāvaṇa had the audacity to invoke divine verdict against him, his silence in the matter was inexplicable. It was the fairness of Mallivāggabrahma that turned the tables on Rāvaṇa and made him bite dust.

The way he conducts himself vis-à-vis his devoted wife is simply reprehensible. He emerges from the exercise as a suspicious and scheming husband, with no qualms to employ the worst trickery and deceit. He sees many phantoms rising from the portrait of Rāvaṇa that innocent Sītā was tricked into drawing by Śūrapankha's daughter Atula to wreak vengeance on her for the wrong done to her mother because of her (Sītā). He comes to suspect her fidelity to him and in a fit of rage orders Lakṣmaṇa to execute her in the forest. That was unmitigated cruelty which ill behoves the nāyaka, much less of the stature of Rāma. No wonder, Sītā, doubtless under the impact of the milieu that has fashioned her, pelts him, at different points of time, with such devastating epithets as suspicious, cruel, petty-minded, jealous, wife-killer, wicked, deceitful, fickle and evil-minded, so deep were the scars he had inflicted on her.



His behaviour following the unexpected meeting with Sītā, after ten long years, is all the more enigmatic. In moments of remorse, he humbly pleads guilty, begs her pardon, touches her feet, expresses unequivocal devotion to her, rates her as the summum bonum of his life, and respectfully asking her to return to Ayodhyā to lend relevance to his meaningless life, simultaneously asking her to kill him in case she decides to stay on in the hermitage because his survival without her would be an exercise in futility. Perhaps in a bid to somehow sustain him without her comforting company, he requests her to send Marikuta and Lava with him which she does in the larger interest of her sons. Obviously, they could not fill the void in his life. He continues to pine for her with no respite in sight.

These tender sentiments and pleading, however, yield place to despicable scheming soon thereafter. He certainly appeals to her softer feelings. He seems to serve a notice of sorts on her in conveying, through the young boys, his resolve to weep to death in case she was firm in her resolve not to return to him. What follows was the negation of all that Rāma stood for. When he finds her unrelenting, he decides to cheat her into believing that he (Rāma) had ended his life because of his inability to stand the pangs of separation from her. Sītā does move into the trap. However, when, on discovering the truth, she tries to leave for the hermitage after some sharp exchanges with Rāma, he not only blocks all possible routes for her to escape, he even goes to the length of threatening her with dire consequences. This was something which even Lord Iṣvara (Śiva) could not condone. He rather reviles him severely for his unbecoming conduct. His reconciliation with her (Sītā), brought about by the Lord after hard bargaining between the two, is as mysterious as was the estrangement.



The couple lived happily after all the bitterness that had turned their life into a virtual hell.

In the Ramakien, Rāma is a small-minded, scheming, and unpredictable person with inconsistent conduct which is again evident in his cheer to Lakṣmaṇa for his killing Sītā in obedience to him.

## SĪTĀ

Like her husband Sītā too In the Ramakien represents an admixture of non-Indian and indigenous components in her character. Whereas the latter is too well known to arouse curiosity, it is the element she owes to the land of her adoption that distinguishes her from what she had been known for, down the ages in India. She is indeed the child of the new environment, not having much in common with Sītā of the Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa.

Born as Rāvaṇa's daughter of his chief-queen Maridodari as a result of her partaking of the divine rice-balls, she, as soon as born, was thrown in a pitcher to float to end in a river, to ward off the disaster which she, as the soothsayers predicted, was to spell doom for the Rākṣasa-race. She was retrieved by Janaka and adopted as his daughter. Conferment of a new parentage on her in the Thai tradition turns out to be her distinct feature.

Thai elements assert tellingly in her behaviour after her return from Lanākā. Her encounter with Adul (Atulā) masquerading as her attendant, projects her as a gullible young woman, shorn of vision to foil the designs of the scheming adversaries. The portrait of Rāvaṇa that she was misled to draw on a slab turned out to be the prelude to a series of sufferings that she had to undergo for no fault of hers. While her readiness to draw the figure was no more than an act of innocence, her subsequent attempt to erase



and conceal it attest her nervousness tempered with a sense of guilt. Thus what could have been dismissed as an aberration turns out to be her undoing. This queer behaviour on her part provokes Rāma to entertain serious misgivings about her fidelity. Unsure of her faithfulness to him, he bids Lakṣmaṇa to put her to sword and bring back her heart to convince him of her execution. This was too much for her to pocket. Not unlike her counterpart in Vālmīki, she decides to end her life. While it may be natural for a chaste woman to think so in the tight situation, her behaviour towards Lakṣmaṇa leaves much to be desired. With poor Lakṣmaṇa vacillating in carrying out the execution, she perhaps in a bid to prove her credentials, jumps to suspect her intention. Even the recluse loses control with a woman in private, she unkindly thundered. Whatever the cause of the outburst, her behaviour towards Lakṣmaṇa is indefensible.

The way she grills Rāma after he was conducted to her by Manikuta, marks the negation of what makes her the perfect specimen of the virtuous womanhood to the Indian mind. Her behaviour projects her as a champion of the present-day movement for women's liberation. Despite Rāma's pleading guilty and his unqualified apology for his harshness to her, she like a revengeful woman, decides to give him the taste of his own medicine. She berates him as a cruel and suspicious person who revels in maltreating his innocent wife. She turns down his sincere plea to return to Ayodhyā to end his tribulations. She would have no truck with a woman-killer, she howled. It would be wiser and safer for her, she added, to perish in wilderness than to stay with a petty-minded, jealous man who could question her chastity on so fragile a pretext as a portrait that she had been tricked



to draw unsuspected. She taunts him to enjoy the comforts in his mansion, leaving her to suffer the fate to which she had become accustomed after undergoing agony for ten long years. Otherwise also, she bitinglly remarked, she was for him as good as dead.

Her caustic tongue did not stop there. She became all the more aggressive. She not only rejected Rāma's subsequent plea, conveyed through the two sons, to bury the past, she was unmoved by his threat to end his life in case she refused to return. She proclaims her resolve to visit Ayodhyā only for his last 'darśana'. She had all the reason to fly into frenzy. On discovering that she had been cheated by her husband by the fake news of his death, she vehemently reproached him with choicest of epithets. She denounced him in biting terms for his despicable action and declared her determination not to give credence to him under any circumstances. She had lost faith in Rāma to the extent that Lord Iṣvara had to exert hard to bring about rapprochement between the two. It was not before Iṣvara had Rāma guilty on several counts, and she herself had reviled him for his fickle-mindedness and unjust behaviour to her that she agreed to terminate the estrangement. It is indeed surprising that she could lead a smooth life with her dear husband thereafter, free from rancour.

Sītā in the Ramakien, not unlike Rāma, also suffers from infirmities. She has shed her idealism that accorded her the most enviable status in Indian tradition. She has an unmistakable imprint of a highly modernized woman. She is different from the common run of women. She has been divested of all that made her great in Indian perspective.



## HANUMĀN

Though an ancillary character, Hanumān is the most colourful figure in the Ramakien. He is the driving force behind all that transpired in the Thai epic. But for him, it would sink into a stale exercise, shorn of vibrancy and action. The various layers of his character unfold themselves so forcefully that he may justly be rated as a strong contender for the highest position of a hero. Though he retains some of his indigenous characteristics, he is essentially the product of the land of his adoption. He is peer of wind in velocity and impetuosity. After all, he is Vāyuputra, Māruti. He is proud of his origin and misses no opportunity to highlight it with verve. A young being, with lovely appearance, he is devoted to the well-being of others. His pretty face is matched by his sweet tongue. He is generous to a fault. His devotion to Rāma is proverbial. He is ever ready to risk his life for the sake of his master. He is indeed an epitome of devotion, sacrifice and self-abnegation.

What strikes one as the most notable characteristic of Hanumān is his phenomenal energy. He is valour incarnate. It is because of his boundless might that he acts as the Rāma's most trusted lieutenant in the series of disasters that he has to encounter. However grave the challenge; he invariably comes out of it with flying colours. He frustrated the concerted efforts of Suvarṇamatsyā to destroy the causeway, which alone paved the way for its construction on schedule. It was again he who administered resounding rebuff to Mahipāla-devāsura and secured Vibhīṣana's release. The greatest challenge to him was posed by Maiyarāba in deceitfully kidnapping Rāma right from his camp to the nether region. There too he picked up



the gauntlet and proved his mettle. He not only overcame a series of obstacles and difficulties in his long journey to Pātāla but also killed the demon on his home-ground and retrieved Rāma right from the jaws of death. The credit for freeing Sugrīva from the clutches of Kumbhakarna also rests with him.

It is, however, not the brute force alone that he embodies. His prowess is deeply tempered with resourcefulness and discretion. His foresight had been chiefly instrumental in revealing the identity of the fake Sītā, that had all but thrown Rāma out of gear. As a hard-boiled strategist, he does not hesitate in employing tricks and stratagems to accomplish his mission. He often believes that the ends justify the means. He thus had no qualms in assuming the form of a dead dog to frustrate Kumbhakarna's bid to propitiate his lethal missile. It was again through a neatly executed stratagem that he disposed of Rāvaṇa's soul, encaged in Goputra's hermitage and thereby enable Rāma to liquidate the demon. But for his strategies and resourcefulness, the outcome would have been disastrous to Rāma. While he aborted the designs of the adversaries through trickery, he employed powerful logic to wean away Survaṇamatsyā from foiling the construction of the causeway. It is surprising that such a brilliant strategist and an intrepid combatant had to eat a humble pie in his encounter with the hermit-boys Maṇikuta and Lava.

It is a measure of the efficacy of the Thai folklore that it turned the Indian demigod celebrated, down the ages, for celibacy and idealism, into a gallant who is out to woo any beautiful girl that comes his way. As examples could be mentioned his love-making with Beṇḍakayī and Suvaṇamatsyā.



Notwithstanding his reckless heroism and gallantry, Hanumān is a fond father. His chance meeting with his sons, Asurphad and Macchānu, stirred his vātsalya deeply and filled him with joy. He acted almost like an innocent child in consenting to repeat his feats of devouring the sun, moon and stars to convince Asurphad of his identity.

Hanumān has doubtless been conceived in the Thai milieu as a multi-faceted personality. He is a phenomenally powerful warrior, a lover, a fond father and as astute tactician, committed to achieve his objective at any cost.

## RĀVAṆA

Rāvaṇa the demon king of Laṅkā, has also undergone substantial transformation in the Thai epic, though, like other characters, he retains intact some of his basic traits as well. His proverbial arrogance, fuelled by his victories and the fame that they brought, emboldened him to pour scorn on even well-meaning and sane advice. Vibhīṣana's unceremonious expulsion, carried out in a fit of rage, turned out to be the last nail in his coffin. It was again sheer arrogance that led him to underrate Rāma's might, which was the greatest faux pas on his part.

While it were valour and boldness that Rāvaṇa symbolizes, it is baffling to find him struggling to avoid direct confrontation with Rāma, 'a mere forester' in his own jargon. That prompts him to try a series of measures to throw him off guard or wear him down off the ground. The theatrical missions of Beṇḍakayī, Suvarṇamatsyā, Maiyarāba etc. stem from his anxiety to catch Rāma unawares and eliminate him surreptitiously without his direct intervention. It is a different matter if all of them end in a fiasco, but they bear testimony to his latent diffidence. Even the queer contrivance of keeping his soul encaged away from Laṅkā,



does not work. Nowhere in the *Ramakien* is he seen to be eager to try conclusions with Rāma. His might notwithstanding, he meets his end as a result of an ingenious strategy chalked out by Vibhīṣaṇa and executed by Hanumān with a masterly skill. Like the other epic figures, he has lost much of his sheen.

## VIBHĪṢAṆA

The sole Rāmāyaṇic character that has risen in stature in the Thai classic is Vibhīṣana, bundled out of the kingdom for no fault of his. Though seen in occasional flashes only, he has a pivotal role to play in almost everything that transpires in the *Ramakien* narrative. He represents a unique fusion of friend, guide and philosopher. It was because of him that Rāma could weather a series of disasters that befell him at different points of time. The credit for retrieving Rāma from the jaws of death, and doing Maiyarāba and Rāvaṇa to death rests with his marvellous strategies, planned and executed in all thoughtfulness.

## CONCLUSION

The Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa and the *Ramakien* are two versions among a host of others of the Rāma story, one is Indian and the other is Thai. It is interesting to note as to how similar and dissimilar they are. As noted about in many cases the dissimilarities are not unique to Thai. They have their roots in India as gleaned from ancient Indian literature and folklore.

Whatever the differences and dissimilarities both delineate the Rāma story which is boundless admitting in it countless strands that is inevitable. The lord is boundless. His story also has to be boundless: *hari ananta hari katha ananta*.









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